



The Political Potential of Glamour: The Example of Underwear

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Abstract. This research project aims to investigate the symbolic and cultural meanings behind an underwear targeted to women in order to analyze the glamorous elements of a garment which is often presented in scenarios that allude to sexuality and transgression. The focus is on the underwear production of the last ten years, as the fashion world has lately been hit by discussions around the need to make fashion accessible for non-normative bodies. Now that fashion is called to play a role in terms of inclusivity on the symbolic as well as on the material level, the question behind this research is: what kind of relationship can be found between an inclusive underwear and glamour? The first part of this research will provide a complex definition of glamour, an ambiguous phenomenon that can either be conservative or subversive. The study will then proceed with an analysis on the relationship between glamour and underwear in the case of the two mainstream lingerie brands Victoria’s Secret and Calvin Klein. Finally, such relationship will be then investigated in the realm of a newborn inclusive lingerie brand named Chitè through an in situ ethnographic investigation.

Keywords: Underwear · Inclusivity · Empowerment · Glamour · Female Fashion

This project aims to investigate the symbolic and cultural meanings behind an underwear targeted to women in order to analyze the glamorous elements in a garment which is often presented in scenarios that allude to sexuality and transgression. Because of its peculiarity that consists of being in direct contact with the body, this type of garment raises relevant questions around the concepts of body ideals, femininity and intimacy. It’s no coincidence that the Italian term to indicate underwear is *intimo*, which refers to its main way of use. Sometimes, however, underwear might become outerwear and change its function: when it is exhibited it can take a subversive function, because it breaks with the taboos linked to hiding certain parts of the body. On the market a rich variety of underwear is available, proposing different designs that produce different modeling effects on the body. Such distinctions in the designs are accompanied by different iconographies on the symbolic level.

This research aims to provide new contributions in the field of fashion studies by investigating the relationship between sustainable and inclusive underwear brands born in the last ten years and glamour. This time span is not arbitrary as the fashion world has lately been hit by discussions around the need to re-evaluate its role in the context of social commitment. For example, an excessively fast production model has been

questioned due to the repercussions it entails on the environment, but also on all the people involved in production. But it is not only what happens “behind the scenes” that needs to be reconfigured, but also the surface. This applies, for example, to the extension of the surface of the garments, which can and must be enlarged to fit “non-normative” bodies. The rethinking of the surface concerns on the one side the designing process of the garment to fit more diverse body; on the other side the surface concerns also the media-sphere where oversized and non-white bodies have traditionally been granted a very limited presence.

As this is a very recent period, detailed studies on the latest underwear developments are lacking. Studies on underwear from a historical perspective certainly represent significant sources to draw upon, however the more traditional costume studies have often isolated the dress from its situations of use and focused on its material structure. Then, with the rise of cultural studies, fashion studies were strongly influenced by the human sciences and tended to favor an analysis on the symbolic level. This excessive propensity towards the material in spite of the symbolic - and vice versa - has often led to unsatisfactory results because it has been lost of sight the fact that certainly dress is understood in a specific cultural context, but it is also its materiality that plays a significant role in defining its social role.

In this regard, Kaori O’Connor’s study (2011) is exemplary because it demonstrates that it is possible to offer a study that overcomes a dichotomy between material and symbolic. O’Connor explains how DuPont had already tried to launch various lycra garments on the market starting from the 1950s, but it was during a time when the use of rigid underwear, which mainly involved the use of the girdle, was considered essential. The success of lycra occurred more than a decade later, in parallel with some social changes, in particular women’s access to the sports, as well as the rise of a fitness culture and a youth culture. DuPont’s success, explains O’Connor, occurred on two levels. One was undoubtedly linked to a successful communication strategy, centered on the association of the properties of this fiber with ideals such as those of youth, movement, dynamism, modernity. But such communication wouldn’t have been as convincing without the effective properties of such garment, i.e. elasticity and low maintenance.

Therefore, starting from the assumption that fashion is called to play a role in terms of a social commitment, and this must happen both in the communication as well as in the production, the question that this research poses is: what kind of relationship can be found between a socially engaged fashion – and in this specific case, a socially engaged underwear – and glamour?

To answer this question it will be necessary to first provide a complex definition of glamour, a phenomenon rarely addressed in academic discussion.

Glamour is an aesthetic code massively employed in the realm of fashion, to the point of seeming to signify the same thing, yet fashion is not always glamorous. What makes then fashion glamorous?

In this regard, Carol Dyhouse in *Glamour: Women, History and Feminism* (2010) identifies ultra-feminine and sparkly attire as the quintessence of a glamorous fashion, which has been seen strongly showcased in the context of the old Hollywood cinema. Dyhouse pays attention to the most recurring types of fabrics and decorations, as well as to the typical silhouette of some types of clothes, as in the case of the so-called slinky

dresses, made of silk, therefore shiny and luxurious, and conceived to fit the body to highlight the female's curves. Red lipstick, diamonds, furs and shiny fabrics compose the most typical repertoire of glamorous items. However, such elements can be either understated or overstated, showing two different faces of glamour. In fact, glamour can be delivered through elegance and good taste, or through exaggeration and overt sexuality. Glamour is a word of uncertain significance characterized by a certain ambiguity: it can be subversive or an expression of the status quo.

When showcased in an exaggerated manner, glamour appeals to queer practices, becoming a "fashionable act" that questions the "natural order" of things and the binary concept of gender (Krause-Wahl; Löffler 2021). Shiny garments deviate from the more traditional fabrics and colors of Western fashion, such as natural fibers like cotton or wool and a neutral color palette. The use of glamorous garments by the queer community expresses a voluntary decision to make oneself visible to the others.

Glamour appears to be a "quality mainly attaching to women" (Gundle 2008) as the most emblematic figures of glamour are female. Glamour plays then an important role in the construction of a precise ideal of femininity: in this regard, the most immediate example is the Hollywood diva.

The transmission of this hetero-normative model of femininity and of a consumerist lifestyle has been a controversial matter inside the feminist movement, originally meeting the resistance of the second-wave feminist movement. Such positions find their culmination in some protests, such as the one in September 1969 in Atlantic City against the Miss America contest: in such occasion, feminist activists threw inside a bin called the "freedom trash can" objects such as bras, lipsticks and fashion magazines. Glamour consists in the crystallization of a moment that is stripped of all its contradictions. This patina –that of the narrative and iconographic world of glamour – would, according to the militant feminists of the second wave, do nothing but keep women out of political commitment and enslave them to an unattainable aesthetic ideal. However, it can be seen that in a very short time this feminist discourse evolves causing ideological divisions inside the movements, because the positions of an intransigent and militant criticism against the canonical models of female beauty and the consumption of luxury goods don't satisfy a part of the movement, which proposes a more articulated and dialectic approach where it is indeed possible to incorporate glamorous and frivolous elements. For the so-called sex-positive feminists even in pornographic practices the power relations between genders can be redefined in an empowering sense. In the moment when the importance to consume explicit material by women is conceived as a potentially liberating act for those who have behind them a history of repression of their sexual wills and fantasies, then the role of women and of the female image in the consumer society needs to be further debated. Some specific items of clothing, such as fashionable underwear, bring out a type of femininity that won't be necessarily labeled anymore *tout court* as objectifying.

After a critical reconstruction of the phenomenon of glamour in the first chapter, the second chapter will offer an analysis based on two well-known underwear brands: Victoria's Secret and Calvin Klein. Such analysis will be based on the garments and the advertisements included in the collections from the late 1990s until the first years of the 2000s.

In the case of Victoria's Secret, it will be explained how the fidelity to a more traditional aspect of glamour was maintained through specific choices in the iconography, i.e. in the mimicry and appearance of the models as well as in the materiality and designs on the garments. Particular attention will be paid to the fantasy bra that embodies the concept of exclusivity, as it is a unique piece, not intended to be sold; and of sparkle and luxury, as it is totally covered with precious stones.

In the book *At Home with Pornography* (Juffer 1998), the author reflects on how Victoria's Secret advertisements convey the message that the consumption of lingerie is mainly an individualistic female desire, and that the desire to satisfy a male desire does not lie primarily in the purchase of these items. Such analysis is aimed at acknowledging an empowering aspect in the purchase of sexually charged items, however the author doesn't deepen the issue related to the exclusion of non-normative bodies from such messages. This emerges clearly in the casting of the models, who are predominantly white-skinned and with conforming bodies. In the rare catalogs where dark-skinned models appear, they are never portrayed in domestic places, but rather in exotic places wearing atypical outfits for the brand. Such choices clearly reinforce racial stereotypes according to which dark-skinned populations are genetically predisposed to a "wild" sexuality, thus unable to "domesticate" it.

Calvin Klein departs from glamour and appropriates the aesthetics of subcultures. On the material level, this happens through the choice of a minimal, unisex, elastic and sparkle-free underwear. The facial expressions and the body types of the female models are very different from the ones seen in Victoria's Secret photographs. The scholar Katharine Wallerstein (1998) glimpses a queer potential within the brand's aesthetic codes that fall under the category of *heroin chic*. What we see in these photographs is a body that rejects the normative categories: it is neither that of an adult nor that of a child, neither that of a woman nor that of a man. The setting provides a documentary aspect to these images, which aren't supposed to be perceived as retouched.

In the third chapter the analysis on the material and medial dimensions of underwear in relation to glamour will shift from international brands such as Victoria's Secret and Calvin Klein to a more niche and recent reality, the one of the made in Italy lingerie brand named Chitè.

Chitè offers a peculiar service, which is the possibility to produce a customizable underwear. According to Paolo Volonté (2021) this can be one of the frontiers for a greater access for consumers with oversized bodies. In this regard, Volonté interestingly asserts that the so-called "tyranny of thinness" lies its roots in the dynamics of mass production because in order to multiply the availability of garments it has been necessary to use prototypes that privilege certain types of bodies to the detriment of others.

The chapter dedicated to Chitè will consist of the results emerged from the interviews and observations gained on site, therefore inside the company, through an ethnographic method of investigation. In order to overcome the dichotomy between material and symbolic, the interviews will involve heterogeneous figures responsible on the material as well as on the symbolic-communicative level.

It is planned to follow Chitè during promotion initiatives, in particular during the photoshoots to observe and collect interviews about the castings for the models and the storytelling behind the shootings.

The interview will involve also those engaged in the logistic and production sector, who promote an artisanal and made in Italy production, making it possible to reconstruct a precise “geography of fashion” (Crewe 2017) of the brand.

The designer will be asked to explain what kind of considerations lead to choose specific fabrics and shapes; thanks to such answers it will be possible to reconstruct the “cultural meaning” that Chitè’s team attach to certain fabrics and designs. More generally such answers will make it possible to identify the aesthetic codes of Chitè and how they reveal a presence or a lack of fascination towards glamour.

The answers and the observations in situ that will be collected emerge will allow to answer the initial question: in which aspects does an ethical brand with a focus on inclusivity engage with glamour?

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